

Culture of Success Drives SSD into Second Decade

By Carlotta Catullo

There are born entrepreneurs and there are those who are born into an entrepreneurial family. Then there are those propelled into entrepreneurship by seemingly unrelated and unforeseen circumstances.

Barbara Hines' accounting background coupled with an interest in technology led to her early work with a McDonald's franchisee in Kansas. The McDonald's Corporation noted her abilities at the local franchise and recruited her for the national office. She then spent a number of years installing software systems for local franchisees throughout the country.

McDonald's executives shifted the company's emphasis to other corporate priorities as the needs of the franchisees were met. Recognizing the market potential for her expertise in the business community, Hines made the fateful decision to start her own business. In 1983, Hines started Software Services of Delaware (SSD), a New Castle-based information technology company offering design, implementation, and support services for computer and telecommunications systems.

Her business partner, Nancy Froome, initially led the company's programming services before assuming the accounting and administrative functions as controller. A year later, Nick Romano joined SSD as a computer programmer. Romano also grew with the firm. More than 22 years later, he now serves as vice president and project manager.

Along with the usual startup concerns, Hines also faced a challenge as a woman business owner in a male-dominated industry. Although more women have entered the technology sector in recent years, Hines and her women colleagues remain outnumbered at industry gatherings.

Hines initially started the company with her own funds but soon sought bank financing to support her growing business. As the recipient of two U.S. Small Business Administration-backed (SBA) 7(a) loans through Wilmington Trust, Hines expanded the business and purchased new equipment. She was also able to grow her staff from three to eventually 18 employees.

The SBA's 7(a) Loan Guaranty Program operates through private-sector banks that provide small business loans guaranteed by the SBA. Providing this guaranty, the SBA helps many small businesses like SSD, Inc., obtain financing to start, build and grow their operations. SBA lending to Delaware businesses tripled in the past four years to a record 290 loans totaling \$35,771,000. During fiscal year 2004, SBA lending to Delaware small businesses ranged from \$2,500 to \$2 million.

In the 1990s, SSD faced a serious economic downturn due to the dot-com industry collapse. The domino effect forced many of SSD's corporate clients to down size or close, thus, affecting the business' bottom line. SSD survived by restructuring its operations, focusing on its core values and avoiding the vortex.

In 2003, SSD expanded its consulting business through an alliance with Integrated Technologies Management. This strategic move is another step in making SSD a full-service information technology company with an expanded presence in the legal and professional services markets. Its next strategic goal will focus on communicating the SSD brand.

Hines credits a supportive family, business mentors and financial support from the SBA and Wilmington Trust as invaluable to SSD's success. She also emphasized the helpful counseling she received from SCORE – Counselors to America's Small Business, a resource partner co-located with the SBA Delaware District Office.

Recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses are important qualities for an entrepreneur. SSD's longevity is linked directly to its well-balanced management team. With her financial background, Hines maintains the big picture, while Froome is the detail person, and Romano focuses on the technology aspect.

Hines speaks proudly of her 24 employees, many of whom have been with the company since the early years. She firmly believes in giving employees enough autonomy to make the right decision for the customer and the firm. Her support of SSD's team is a key strategy in building and sustaining loyalty among the company's employees and clients.

SSD's clients are typically recruited through referrals and networking events. It counts an impressive range of businesses, non-profit organizations, higher education institutions and professional service firms among its valued customers. The company targets firms with 10 or more computers and promotes itself as a partner that takes ownership for the success of the entire project. This commitment to customer service is evident in SSD's 95 percent customer retention rate.

Success has not been without its recognition. SSD has received the Delaware State Chamber's Superstar in Business Award and the News Journal's Best in Business Up and Coming Technology Company and Technology Company to Watch Awards.

The challenges remain despite small business success. Hines describes SSD's current challenges as rapid growth, continuous reinvention to keep pace with new technology, and creating an increased demand for the company's services.

Hines encourages new entrepreneurs to recruit a support network including a lawyer, an accountant and mentors who will tell it like it is. That fits perfectly with Hines' own personal aspirations. "Helping others, specifically other women who are in business or starting a business, is something I want to do. I seem to have a talent for running a

business, so I'd like to share my knowledge with others who are willing to listen and learn."

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